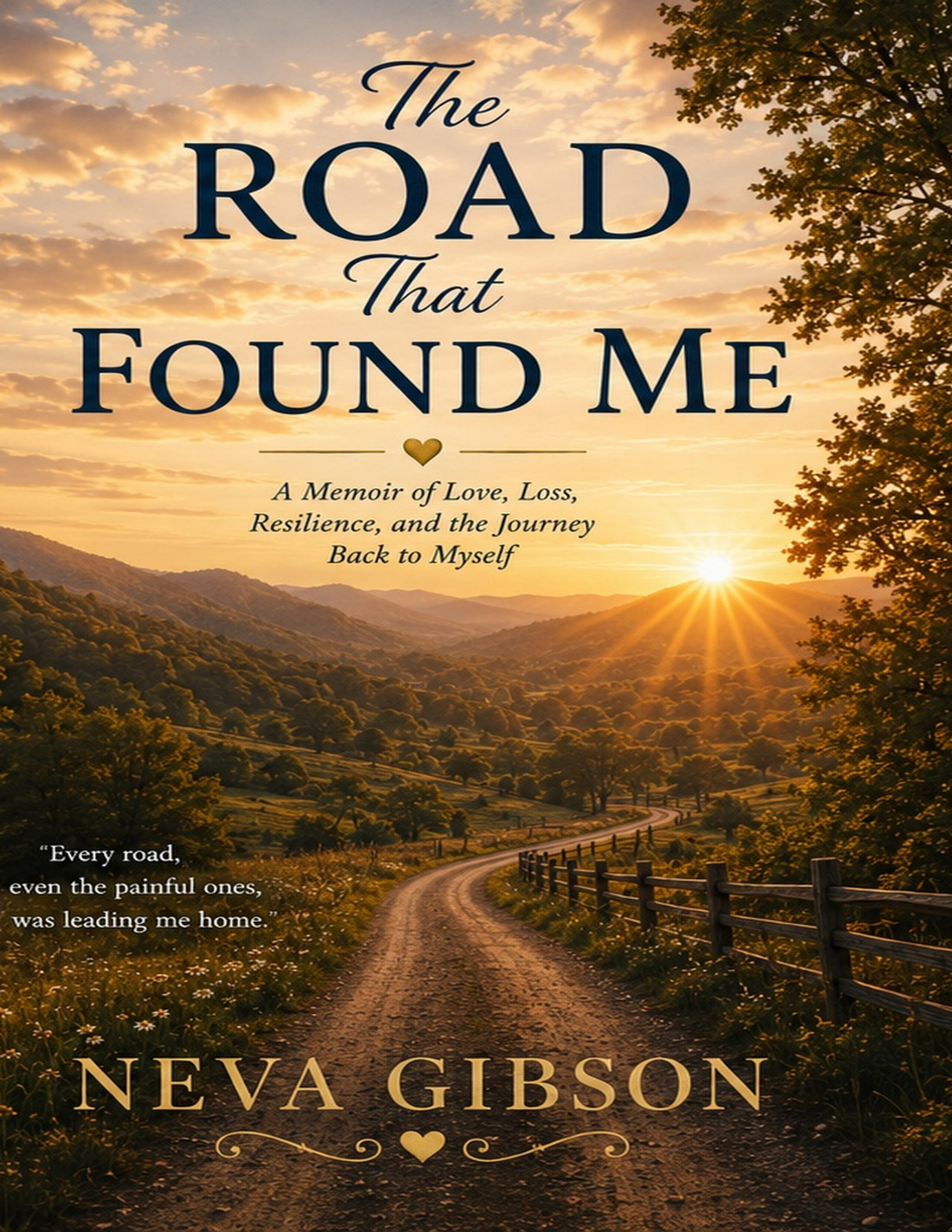




The ROAD *That* FOUND ME



*A Memoir of Love, Loss,
Resilience, and the Journey
Back to Myself*

"Every road,
even the painful ones,
was leading me home."

NEVA GIBSON



THE ROAD THAT FOUND ME

A Memoir

Neva Gibson

“This is not the story of the roads I chose.
It is the story of the roads that found me.”

— Neva Gibson

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This is a work of nonfiction based on the author’s personal memories and experiences. Some names, identifying details, and minor characteristics may have been changed to protect privacy. Certain events may be compressed or reconstructed from memory. The author has made every effort to present events truthfully and to the best of her knowledge and recollection.

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Dedication

To my children,

You have always been my greatest purpose and my greatest blessing. Every decision I made, every mountain I climbed, and every time I found the strength to begin again was because of you.

This book is for you.

And for my father, Roy Calvin Gipson. Your time with us was far too short, but your love has stayed with me for a lifetime.

And to my wife, Cynthia “Bull” Linley. Thank you for walking beside me, believing in me, and showing me what peace feels like.

Author’s Note

The story you are about to read is a memoir based on my personal memories, experiences, and the events of my life as I remember them.

Every effort has been made to tell this story truthfully. Memories can fade over time, and different people may remember the same events in different ways.

To protect the privacy of certain individuals, some names and identifying details may have been changed. This book is not intended to harm, accuse, or embarrass anyone. It is simply the story of one woman’s journey through love, loss, family, motherhood, heartbreak, resilience, and healing.

The opinions, thoughts, and reflections shared throughout these pages are my own and represent how I experienced the events of my life.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story.

Neva Gibson

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To the Reader

Prologue

The Road That Found Me

People often ask if I would change anything about my life if I had the chance.

For a long time, my answer would have been yes.

I would have wanted one more day with my father. I would have wanted my mother to never experience the kind of grief that changed her forever. I would have wanted my children to grow up without seeing the pain that comes when adults are trying to survive their own broken hearts. I would have wanted to avoid the relationships that left me questioning my worth.

There are many moments I wish had been easier. Many tears I wish had never been cried. Many nights I wish had ended differently.

But age has a way of changing how you look at the road behind you.

I've learned that life isn't made up only of the beautiful moments. Sometimes it is the hardest seasons that shape us the most. The roads we never wanted to travel often become the ones that teach us who we are.

Mine began in the mountains of eastern Kentucky.

It carried me through childhood adventures, heartbreaking loss, motherhood at a young age, difficult marriages, years of searching for where I belonged, and more fresh starts than I can count.

There were times I thought I was completely lost.

Looking back now, I realize I wasn't.

Every detour led somewhere. Every ending made room for another beginning. Every person who entered my life, whether they stayed or left, became part of the woman I would one day become.

For years, I believed I was searching for the right road.

The truth is, the road had been finding me all along.

This is my story.

Chapter One

Where My Story Began

I was born on December 19, 1977, at Highlands Regional Hospital in Prestonsburg, Kentucky.

From the moment I entered the world, I was already part of a large family with a long history. My father, Roy Calvin Gipson, was forty-three years old when I was born. He had been born on April 18, 1934, and had eight children from a previous marriage. My mother, Goldie Gipson, was thirty-four years old. She was born on March 8, 1943, and also had eight children from a previous marriage.

Together, they had already raised sixteen children before my brother and I came along.

I never learned how my parents met. It's one of those family stories that disappeared with time. Like so many things from that generation, no one thought to write it down, and by the time I was old enough to ask, the people who knew the answer were gone.

When I was born, my parents weren't living together. My father lived on his mother's property at the last house in Short Fork Hollow—what we simply called “the holler.” My mother was renting a place somewhere in Salyersville, though I never knew exactly where.

Before I was even old enough to understand, my existence became the subject of family doubt. My grandmother, Mamaw Media Gipson, didn't believe I was my father's child. Her doubts were strong enough that my mother had a paternity test done. The results proved that Roy Calvin Gipson was my father, and Mom made sure Mamaw Media saw those results herself.

The stories I heard about Mamaw Media described her as a woman with very strong opinions. Some people even called her hateful. I never had the chance to decide for myself because she passed away in 1979, when I was still very young.

Sometimes I wonder if, before she died, she ever looked at me and simply saw her granddaughter. I hope she did.

When I was about six months old, Mom moved in with Dad on the family property in Short Fork Hollow. The house was large and white, almost as if two homes had been joined together into one. Beside it stood a huge wooden barn, and the land seemed to stretch farther than my little eyes could see.

In 1978, my parents married and officially began their life together.

Dad often said he didn't want any more children. But in June of 1981, my little brother, Calvin Gibson, was born. Mom loved telling the story that because he shared Dad's name, I became confused and called my baby brother "Dad" for a while.

Life in the holler was beautiful, but winters were hard. Getting to the school bus meant walking all the way to the mouth of the holler. Eventually, Mom and Dad made a difficult decision.

They would leave the place Dad had called home his entire life.

At the time, none of us knew it would be the first of many moves our family would make.

And my journey was only beginning.

Chapter Two

The Little White House

Leaving Short Fork Hollow wasn't an easy decision for my parents.

My father had spent his entire life there. The mountains, the land, and the old family home were part of who he was. But Mom knew there had to be an easier way for Calvin and me.

We rented a little white house on Falcon Road.

I was still very young, but that little house became one of my favorite places from childhood. It sat on a small hill overlooking the road, and even today, when I drive past it, I find myself slowing down.

For just a moment, I'm not an adult anymore. I'm that little girl again.

One of my favorite memories happened there on Thanksgiving. Mom had the turkey in the oven, and the whole house smelled like a holiday. She was making banana pudding, carefully placing vanilla wafers around it.

Every time she turned her back, my little fingers would sneak across the counter and steal one. I thought I was being quiet. Eventually, she caught me.

Looking back, it's funny how the smallest moments become some of the memories we treasure most.

Not long after moving to Falcon Road, my parents decided they wanted something more permanent.

In 1986, we packed our belongings once again and left our hometown for Paintsville, Kentucky.

For the first time in my life, I would be leaving behind everything familiar.

I didn't know it then, but Paintsville would become the place where some of the happiest memories of my childhood—and some of the most heartbreaking—would be made.

Chapter Three

A Place Called Paintsville

In 1986, Mom and Dad bought a house in Paintsville, Kentucky.

The house sat on a beautiful piece of property with a large field beside it and mountains rising behind it. To my brother Calvin and me, it was paradise.

We explored every inch of that property. Behind our house was a mountain, and on the other side we found a small pond. We'd grab our fishing poles, catch bluegill, and proudly carry them home. Mom would fry them for supper, and somehow they always tasted better because we'd caught them ourselves.

Just over the hill was the 201 Speedway. On race nights, the engines echoed through the mountains and became part of the soundtrack of our evenings.

One afternoon, Dad decided it was time for my first driving lesson. Looking back, I know I was much too young. He drove the car into the big field, showed me the brake and gas, and made sure I buckled my seat belt.

When he told me to go, I slammed my foot down on the gas. The car took off across the field.

“Hit the brakes! Hit the brakes!” Dad yelled.

I finally stomped on the brake. When the car stopped, there was a tree standing right in front of us.

Dad looked over at me. “Get out. You're not driving anymore.”

That was the beginning and end of my first driving lesson.

When school started, Calvin and I were the new kids. We didn't know anyone and had no family there other than Mom and Dad. But we settled in quickly, made friends, and before long Paintsville felt like home.

As a child, I was shy and loved being around my family and friends. I was more of a tomboy then, happiest outside exploring, fishing, and getting dirty without thinking twice about it.

That changed around thirteen. Somewhere along the way, the tomboy in me turned into a full-blown prissy girl. I started caring more about clothes, hair, and looking nice. Underneath it all, though, I was still the same shy Kentucky girl.

At the time, I thought life would always be that simple.

I had no way of knowing how much Paintsville would shape me.

Chapter Four

The First Time My Heart Knew

By the time Calvin and I had settled into school, Paintsville no longer felt strange.

Those summers became some of the happiest days of my childhood.

There was one girl in particular who became very special to me. We spent nearly every day together. Sometimes I was at her house; other times she was at mine.

At the time, I didn't know anything about labels. I didn't know words like “gay” or “lesbian.” Those weren't conversations children heard where I grew up.

One afternoon, while we were at my house, she kissed me.

It was my very first kiss.

I wasn't confused or frightened. It simply felt natural.

I remember telling Mom and Dad that she was my girlfriend. Neither made a big deal out of it. They probably thought it was innocent childhood play.

The truth was, I was too young to understand why that friendship felt different. I only knew that it did.

After we moved away from Paintsville, we wrote letters for a while. Little by little, the letters became fewer until they stopped altogether.

Life carried us in different directions.

Looking back now, I realize she gave me my first glimpse of who I truly was.

At the time, I couldn't have understood what that meant.

I was simply a little girl enjoying summer with a friend, believing life would always be this simple.

I had no idea that before long, everything my family had built in Paintsville would be reduced to ashes.

Chapter Five

Fire and Ashes

Even though we had moved to Paintsville, Salyersville would always be home.

We still traveled there for holidays and festivals. One Fourth of July, we went to the celebration around the courthouse—food, vendors, family, friends, dancing, and fireworks.

I remember standing on the courthouse steps when a police officer walked up and quietly asked to speak with my parents.

Within seconds, Mom and Dad were hurrying us toward the car.

Once we were inside, Dad told us our house was on fire.

When we arrived back in Paintsville, our home was gone.

As a child, I didn't think about furniture or clothes. I thought about my teddy bear. Mom and Dad had given it to me when I was about five. I had loved it until Mom had to stitch it back together. I had left it on my bed.

Now it was gone.

For a little while, we stayed with family. But my parents were proud people and didn't want to overstay their welcome.

So we moved into our van.

For the next three months, that van became our home. We'd shower at my sister's house. Mom heated water over a fire so we could wash our faces before school. We brushed our teeth with bottled water.

One day, my teacher asked about the fire and I told her we were living in our van. When I got off the bus later, my teacher, principal, and social workers were there. I was terrified that I had done something wrong. They were simply checking to make sure we were safe.

Looking back, I understand how difficult those months must have been for my parents.

At the time, I remember the campfire, food cooked over an open flame, and Dad telling stories about growing up.

One of the hardest seasons of our lives also gave me some of my favorite memories.

A house can burn to the ground. Possessions can disappear overnight.

But home is built by the people who refuse to let go of one another when everything else is gone.

For three months, our home was a van parked beside the ashes of the life we had lost.

And somehow, it was enough.

Chapter Six

Back Where We Belonged

After three months of living in our van, we were ready to begin again.

Instead of rebuilding in Paintsville, Mom and Dad sold the property as it was and we moved back to Salyersville.

Leaving Paintsville wasn't easy. I was leaving friends, school, memories, and the girl who had given me my first kiss.

Back home, Mom and Dad bought a farm on Johnson Fork.

Everything happened quickly. Before long, the house was furnished, we had new beds, and life felt steady again.

Our home was a two-story white farmhouse with a large wooden barn. The property was fenced and soon alive with chickens, goats, ducks, geese, a horse, and even a cow. Mom and Dad planted two large gardens.

When school started, I recognized the faces around me. Coming home felt familiar.

Because both of my parents had large families before they married each other, some of my nieces and nephews were close to my age. I even went to school with some of them. To other people it might have sounded unusual. To me, it was simply family.

For the first time since the fire, it felt like we belonged somewhere again.

I thought the hardest days were behind us.

I couldn't have known that life was about to ask far more of me than I had ever imagined.

Chapter Seven

Learning to Hide

Seventh grade felt like the beginning of a whole new world.

Middle school had a way of making almost every child question where they belonged, and I was no different.

One of my friends, Melissa, told me one day that a boy liked me.

“A boy?” I remember thinking.

His name was Daniel.

Around that same time, I was quietly carrying feelings I didn't know how to explain. Ever since Paintsville, I had known something felt different. I noticed girls in a way my friends talked about noticing boys.

I remember bringing it up to some older siblings.

The answer came quickly: absolutely not. That's not how life is supposed to be. You grow up, marry a man, have children, and raise a family.

So I pushed those feelings down and tried to become the person everyone expected me to be.

Melissa introduced Daniel and me in the cafeteria. We were around twelve years old. He was a skinny seventh-grade boy, and before long we started dating.

Daniel became many of my firsts. My first real boyfriend. My first school dance. We celebrated eighth-grade graduation together. I spent time

at his house and he spent time at mine.

From the outside, I looked like any other teenage girl with a boyfriend.

Inside, I was still carrying questions I didn't know how to ask.

When I entered high school, I was nervous about being mixed in with older students. Daniel dropped out during our freshman year, and our relationship ended.

Little by little, I learned how to hide parts of myself from the world.

Then, one hot August morning in 1993, everything I believed about life changed forever.

Chapter Eight

The Day Everything Changed

By the summer of 1993, I was getting ready to start my freshman year of high school.

It was August in eastern Kentucky, hot enough that our box fans worked constantly in the windows because we didn't have air conditioning.

One morning I came downstairs and found Mom and Dad preparing to go look for one of Dad's beagle dogs that had gotten away on Dad's old property on Short Fork the day before. Mom was packing lunch because they expected to be gone for hours.

Dad asked if I wanted to go.

I told him no. I was going to stay home.

I turned toward the house.

Then I heard a loud thump.

I ran back onto the porch and saw Dad on his knees.

Mom screamed, "Call 911!"

I ran to the phone, gave dispatch our address, and told them something was wrong with my dad.

When I returned, Dad had managed to stand. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a little brown bottle, and put a pill under his tongue. Years later, I learned it was nitroglycerin.

He sat in his chair and assured us he was okay.

For a moment, I believed him.

Then he stood again.

This time, when he fell, he didn't get back up.

The ambulance came and took him to the hospital. Mom, Calvin, and I followed.

We sat in the waiting room until a doctor walked toward us. Before he said anything, I could see it on his face.

They had done everything they could.

Dad didn't make it.

I felt sick and ran to the bathroom. I could hear Mom in the hallway screaming and crying.

The drive home was long and quiet.

Over the next days, Mom planned Dad's funeral. Dad knew so many people through hunting clubs, friends, neighbors, and family that the funeral home was full.

Everyone there had lost someone.

But I had lost my dad.

I walked into that August morning worried about starting high school.

By the end of the day, I was learning how to live without my father.

Chapter Nine

The Winter That Changed Everything

After Dad passed away, Mom kept Calvin and me home from school for the rest of the month.

The house felt different. The farm felt different. Even the silence sounded different.

Every morning, Mom made a cup of coffee and carried it to the back porch. She sat beside Dad's empty chair.

I never asked why.

I understood.

As the weeks turned into months, grief settled over our home.

That first winter after Dad died was one of the hardest winters I remember. Looking back, I realize it wasn't only the weather that made it feel cold. It was his absence.

The farm became more than Mom could manage alone.

Then the trucks started coming.

One by one, people arrived to buy our animals. Watching them leave felt like losing another piece of Dad. I finally went to my room, buried my face in a pillow, and cried.

Today, I understand Mom wasn't giving up.

She was surviving.

As 1994 began, I watched my mother drift farther away. She hadn't just lost her husband. It seemed as though she had lost herself.

As a teenager, part of me understood that she was hurting. Another part wanted my mother back.

I still needed her.

One afternoon, Mom and I went to visit my sister.

I had no idea that I was about to meet someone who would change the direction of my life.

His name was Richard.

Chapter Ten

Growing Up Too Fast

In 1994, Mom was still grieving deeply.

One day while I was at my sister's house, I met Richard. His dad drove a truck with my brother-in-law. I was fifteen, and Richard was eighteen.

Richard asked me to go on a date. I told him I wasn't allowed to car date. He asked Mom's permission, and to my surprise, she agreed. If Dad had been alive, I knew the answer would have been no.

That Saturday, Richard pulled into the driveway in a friend's car. I still have a picture of myself sitting on the couch waiting for him.

We drove to Paintsville, ate dinner at Ponderosa, then went to the Plaza parking lot where teenagers gathered to sit on cars, listen to music, laugh, and talk. Richard had me home by my ten o'clock curfew.

Around this time, Mom could no longer bear living in the big farmhouse. Her grief had changed everything.

One night while I was staying with my sister, Mom and Calvin arrived and told us the house had burned.

Later, I learned Mom had set the fire herself. Calvin told me she had sent him to wait in the car. When he went back inside for something he'd forgotten, he saw her at the stove with the burners on and papers piled high. He didn't know what to do. He went back to the car, and Mom eventually came out and drove away.

There was no insurance.

Eventually, Mom replaced the house with a smaller mobile home on the Johnson Fork property.

Richard and I continued dating. Something never felt quite right to me. He often felt more like a friend than the person I was meant to spend my life with.

At seventeen, I found out I was pregnant.

Richard was with me when I first took a test at a friend's house. We stared at the result, and he asked, “How are we going to tell our parents?”

“I don't know,” I said. “My mom is going to kill me.”

Not long afterward, Richard ended our relationship.

Most people would expect me to say I was devastated.

The truth is, I felt relieved.

I was scared about becoming a mother, but I also knew that forcing a relationship wasn't the answer.

Soon, though, my mother would learn the truth—and my life would begin changing faster than I could have imagined.

Chapter Eleven

Becoming a Mother

One evening, Mom looked at me and asked, “Have you and Richard been intimate?”

I nodded.

She told me to get in the car.

On the way to my sister's house, Mom stopped at Rite Aid and came back carrying a bag. At my sister's house, she pulled out a pregnancy test.

I already knew what it would say. I took it because Mom needed to see it.

Two pink lines appeared.

I was pregnant.

my sister began to cry and told Mom it wouldn't have happened if she had been home more. Mom told her to mind her own business, and suddenly they were arguing as if I wasn't even sitting there.

Later, Mom called Richard's mother. When she hung up, she told me Richard wanted a DNA test.

I didn't care. Our relationship was over.

Over the next nine months, something unexpected happened.

Mom became Mom again.

She drove me all the way to Lexington for my doctor's appointments and stayed beside me. Those months gave me back something I thought I had lost after Dad died.

Richard and I didn't speak during the pregnancy.

During the early morning hours of February 16, 1995, I couldn't sleep because of pain in my back. I went into Mom's room and climbed into bed beside her.

Within minutes, she got up and began getting dressed.

“Where are you going?”

“You're in labor,” she said.

My baby wasn't due until February 22.

Mom called my cousin next door and asked her to drive us to Lexington.

After the long drive and labor, on February 17, 1995, I gave birth to my first child, a beautiful baby girl.

Mom called Richard's mother. Richard and his mother came to the hospital the next morning. Once his mother saw the baby, the DNA test was never questioned again. She looked just like him.

I spent three days in the hospital, staring at tiny fingers and toes, trying to understand how I would finish school and raise a baby.

At seventeen years old, I was no longer just somebody's daughter.

I was somebody's mother.

And that little girl was loved more than I ever thought it was possible to love another human being.

Chapter Twelve

Doing What We Thought Was Right

When I brought my daughter home, our families welcomed her with open arms.

Before long, both my mother and Richard's mother believed the right thing was for Richard and me to get married.

The truth was, Richard and I hadn't been together during my pregnancy. I wasn't excited about marriage. I kept asking myself how you marry someone you don't love.

But we were young, we had a baby, and everyone believed marriage was simply what you did.

So we did.

Our families gave us a beautiful wedding. I wore a white dress, Richard wore a white tuxedo, and friends and family celebrated with us.

I wanted it to work.

I became a Certified Nursing Assistant at eighteen and worked night shift at our local nursing home. Richard's mother cared for our daughter while I worked.

When I became a CNA, I thought it might only be the beginning. I wanted to continue school and become a Registered Nurse.

But something about being a CNA kept pulling at my heart. I was right there with the people I cared for, helping with the everyday things that mattered. The longer I did the work, the more I understood that I didn't have to become an RN to prove I had gone far enough.

Being a CNA was where I belonged.

From the outside, everything looked as though it was falling into place.

Behind closed doors, our marriage began falling apart.

Richard became abusive.

I had never lived in a home where I was treated that way. I learned quickly that a child can give two people a reason to try, but a child cannot create the love a marriage needs.

In the middle of it all, I became pregnant again, this time with a little boy.

When I was five months pregnant, I made one of the hardest decisions of my young life.

I left.

I moved back in with Mom. By then, she had remarried. I was grateful for somewhere safe to go, but I knew I needed a place of my own.

I was about to become the mother of two children.

For the second time in my young life, I was starting over.

Chapter Thirteen

Building a Life

Richard and I divorced before our son was born.

On October 10, 1996, I welcomed my little boy into the world.

Even though Richard and I were no longer together, he remained a steady presence in our children's lives. The marriage had ended, but his role as a dad did not.

Then someone from my past walked back into my life.

Daniel.

The same boy I had met in the seventh-grade cafeteria.

Daniel and I started talking again, and before long we were building a relationship. I believed in him and helped put him through school so he could earn his certification to work as a reclaimer, clearing timber from mountaintops.

When he finished, he went to work. I continued my career in healthcare.

Little by little, life seemed to come together.

We bought a house. We bought land. We worked hard.

On April 17, 1998, we welcomed our son into the world.

Before that year could move forward, I experienced another loss that changed my family.

On February 21, 2004, my mother, Goldie Gipson, passed away. She was sixty years old.

Mom had suffered from asthma throughout her life. In the end, she died from respiratory failure.

Losing Mom was different from losing Dad, but it left another empty place in me. Our relationship had gone through difficult seasons, especially after Dad died, but she was still my mother. She was the woman who had driven me all the way to Lexington for my appointments when I was pregnant, the woman who had become Mom again when I needed her most.

By then I was grown and raising children of my own, but losing your mother has a way of reminding you that some part of you will always be somebody's child.

She was only sixty. I wasn't ready to lose her.

Life kept moving, even when grief made it feel like it shouldn't.

In 2004, Daniel and I got married.

From the outside, we seemed to have the perfect life. Friends and family would tell us, "You two started with nothing, and now look at everything you've built."

I would smile.

But what people saw wasn't what we lived.

They saw our house, land, jobs, children, and vehicles.

They didn't see what happened after the front door closed.

Early in our relationship, I was honest with Daniel that I had always been attracted to women. I never acted on those feelings. I was committed to our relationship and our family.

Life with Daniel wasn't easy. He liked things done a certain way. There were rules for almost everything, and conflict followed when things weren't done the way he wanted.

As the years passed, I realized something painful.

I hadn't escaped one unhealthy relationship.

I had walked into another.

Still, I stayed. I told myself that when my children were older, I would leave.

Then life surprised us again.

On July 3, 2007, our daughter was born.

We hadn't planned another baby and had taken precautions, but the moment I held her, none of that mattered.

She was a blessing.

By then, motherhood had given me four children with four completely different personalities.

My oldest daughter had been a princess almost from the beginning. As a little girl, she loved playing dress-up, and later she danced in school. She always seemed to have friends around her because she was simply easy to love. Even now, at thirty-one years old, I still look at her and see that same princess.

My boys played basketball and football, but some of my favorite memories with them happened far away from a gym or a field. They loved to fish.

On weekends, I would pack us a picnic and drive them down to the pond on Johnson Fork. We could spend the whole day there with our fishing poles, something to eat, and nowhere else we needed to be.

Back then, those probably felt like ordinary Saturdays. Looking back, they are some of the days I treasure most.

Those little boys grew into handsome, independent young men who are making lives of their own. Part of me can still see them standing beside that pond.

My youngest daughter seemed strong from the day she was born. Even as a little girl, she knew what she wanted, and nobody was going to tell her any different. Strong-minded, independent, and stubborn, she kept me on my toes.

As she grew older, I began to see that the stubborn streak that could test me as her mother was also part of her strength. Today she is still that same strong, independent young woman.

All four of my children found their own ways of becoming who they were meant to be. I spent years wondering whether I was doing motherhood right. Now I look at the adults they are becoming and feel proud.

I believe life will be good to my children. They deserve it.

Looking back, I spent years trying to build the perfect family.

What I truly wanted wasn't perfection.

I wanted peace.

It would take me years to understand those aren't always the same thing.

Chapter Fourteen

Starting Over With Me

Eventually, I walked away from nearly two decades of my life.

I left the house. The land. The vehicles. The things Daniel and I had worked years to build.

What I took couldn't be loaded into a moving truck: my memories, my experiences, my children, and myself.

At the time, I wasn't completely sure who that last person was anymore. I was about to find out.

...

Starting over sounds exciting when people say it from a safe distance. A fresh start. A new beginning. A clean slate.

Actually doing it is different. Starting over means questioning whether you've made the right decision. It means accepting uncertainty because you've finally decided uncertainty is better than the life you were living.

I found another place to call home. It wasn't the life I'd spent years building, but it was mine, and the quiet belonged to me.

My older children were growing up and building lives of their own. My youngest daughter was still with me. I was still Mom, but motherhood was changing, and slowly I realized I had room to become something besides the person who spent every waking minute taking care of everybody else.

For most of my adult life, I had been somebody's daughter, somebody's mother, somebody's wife or partner. Even as a CNA, I was the person taking care of somebody else.

Now I had to answer a simpler question: Who was I when nobody else's name came after mine?

Neva. Just Neva.

• • •

I worked. Work had always been something I understood. You showed up and did what needed doing.

Slowly, I made my new home mine. Little decisions felt important. If I wanted quiet, I had quiet. I didn't have to negotiate my own existence.

At first independence felt strange. Then it started feeling good.

There is a difference between being alone and being lonely. I had spent years surrounded by people and still experienced loneliness. Now I could sit by myself and feel peaceful.

I began to understand that strength didn't only mean enduring whatever life handed me. Strength could also mean deciding, I don't want to live like this anymore, and changing it.

I had left property, land, vehicles, things with real financial value. But I had gained peace. You can't park peace in a driveway or put a price tag on it.

• • •

There was another truth waiting for me, the same one that had followed me since Paintsville.

Women.

I'd known my attraction to women was real since I was young. I'd been honest with Daniel about it. But knowing something privately and allowing yourself to live openly are very different things.

By then, I was tired of worrying about everybody else's reaction.

If I had survived losing houses, losing Dad, losing Mom, divorce, raising children, and walking away from almost everything I'd spent years building, what exactly was I still so afraid of?

I'd survived worse things than disapproval.

• • •

By 2018, my life had changed. I knew I could support myself. I knew I could make decisions for myself. I knew being alone wasn't something I needed to fear.

Then, on May 13, 2018, I lost my brother Calvin.

He was only thirty-six years old.

Calvin wasn't just my brother. He was my only full sibling, the one person who had grown up beside me and shared the childhood memories that belonged to the two of us.

By then, Calvin had grown up, married, and had a son of his own.

Losing him took away a big part of my life. There are people who know the adult version of you, and then there are the people who knew you before you became any of those things. Calvin knew that little girl. He knew where we came from.

I had already learned what grief could do after losing Dad and Mom, but losing my brother was different. It felt like another piece of the family I had started this life with was suddenly gone.

Thirty-six was far too young.

I carried that loss with me as life continued moving forward.

Then I met a woman.

I didn't know what the relationship would become. For once, I wasn't trying to see the ending from the beginning.

I was a grown woman, a mother, a survivor, and after all those years of learning how to live for everyone else, I was finally beginning to understand how to live for myself.

For the first time, loving a woman wouldn't have to be a secret.

Chapter Fifteen

Living Out Loud

In 2018, I met a woman.

Even writing that sentence feels simple. Maybe that's because, by then, I was finally beginning to understand that it was simple.

I was a woman who loved women. Some part of me had known that since I was a little girl in Paintsville.

Sometimes I think about that little girl, the one who kissed another girl and then casually told Mom and Dad she was my girlfriend. I hadn't been ashamed. I liked her. That was all.

Then I got older, and the world got louder.

• • •

Life carried me in other directions. I dated boys. I married Richard. I became a mother. I built a long life with Daniel. I worked. I raised my children.

But none of those things erased the truth I'd known about myself when I was young.

By 2018, I didn't want to hide it anymore.

For the first time in my adult life, I had space to ask myself what I wanted. Not what looked right. Not what made other people comfortable.

So when this woman entered my life, I allowed myself to love a woman openly.

• • •

The relationship became serious, but much of what happened during those years belongs with the people who lived it.

Seven years of my life were connected to this woman. There were memories, ordinary days, good times, difficult times, and private conversations.

This book is my story, but that doesn't mean every person who crosses my path loses the right to privacy. Telling the truth doesn't require telling everything.

What matters here is what that period represented in my life. She wasn't simply the first woman I would marry. She was the first woman I had built a real relationship and a life with. No matter how that story eventually ended, that mattered.

I was no longer hiding.

For the first time, the woman I was on the inside matched the woman I allowed the world to see.

• • •

In 2022, we got married.

I became a wife again. This time, to a woman.

There was something powerful about that for me. Not because marrying a woman erased the men I'd loved. It didn't. It mattered because I was finally living without hiding a part of myself.

The little girl in Paintsville had grown up. It had taken her a long time to get there. But she had made it.

• • •

I wish I could reach backward through all those years and tell that little girl something.

I wouldn't warn her about every heartbreak or every loss.

I'd simply tell her: There is nothing wrong with the way your heart loves.

Maybe she already knew that. Maybe it was everybody else who made her forget.

In 2022, I stood in a place I once wasn't sure I would ever allow myself to stand.

I was married to a woman. I wasn't hiding her. I wasn't hiding myself. And I wasn't waiting for somebody to tell me whether my life was acceptable.

Whatever the future held, that mattered.

At that moment, this was my life. And for the first time, I wasn't ashamed to let the world see it.

Chapter Sixteen

Another Ending

In 2022, I married the first woman I had ever built a life with.

For the little girl who had once been told that loving another girl was something she wasn't supposed to do, that alone represented how far I'd come.

The marriage lasted until 2025.

Then it ended. We divorced.

...

There are probably readers who will want to know what happened. I'm not going to answer those questions.

Not because the marriage didn't matter. It did. She was part of my life from 2018 until 2025.

But some stories don't belong entirely to one person. This is where I choose to draw that line.

The marriage happened. It ended. And the details of why will remain private.

Writing a memoir has taught me the difference between honesty and exposure.

...

The divorce itself was difficult enough. But there was something else I had to deal with.

People talked. Rumors spread. Opinions formed.

Two people can live inside something for years, yet people standing completely outside it can become convinced they understand exactly what happened.

There was a time when I wanted to explain myself, correct everybody, defend myself.

Eventually I realized how exhausting that would be.

People were going to believe what they wanted to believe. They weren't living my life. I was.

• • •

Still, another marriage had ended, and I had to face another beginning.

I had started over before. More than once.

That didn't mean I enjoyed doing it. It meant I knew I could.

This time I didn't want to rush into anything. I wasn't looking for another wife or somebody to fill an empty space.

What I needed was time. Peace. Maybe somebody to talk to. A friend.

I didn't know that person was already on her way into my story.

• • •

On April 7, 2025, my phone lit up with a message.

It came from a woman in Georgia.

Cynthia Linley.

Everybody called her Bull.

She wasn't sending some dramatic declaration of love. She was checking on me.

Sometimes the smallest moments become the ones that change everything.

I answered.

We started talking.

At first, that's all it was.

Conversation.

On April 7, 2025, Bull was simply the woman who checked on me.

And I was simply the woman who answered.

Chapter Seventeen

No Screen Between Us

Bull and I kept talking.

One conversation became another. Then another.

Before long, seeing her name on my phone had become part of my day.

Texts turned into FaceTime calls. I learned her expressions, her laugh, the looks that eventually required no explanation.

She learned mine too.

We talked about serious things. We talked about absolutely nothing. Sometimes those were the best conversations.

Bull could make me laugh. Really laugh.

• • •

There was distance between us. Bull was in Georgia. I was in Kentucky.

In some ways, that helped us. We couldn't build something around physical attraction alone. We had to communicate.

So we talked.

For hours sometimes.

Bull saw me during a complicated time in my life. I wasn't presenting some perfect version of myself.

She listened.

That mattered.

• • •

I wasn't looking for another relationship. But feelings don't always wait for permission.

If something funny happened, Bull was the person I wanted to tell. If I'd had a bad day, I wanted to hear her voice.

That's how somebody quietly becomes important. Not through one enormous moment, but through a hundred little ones.

Eventually, we needed to meet.

Bull decided to make the drive from Georgia to Kentucky.

• • •

Because life has a sense of humor, I had to work a twelve-hour shift the day Bull arrived.

She reached Kentucky around three that afternoon. I was still at work and wouldn't get off until around seven.

I worked and watched the clock.

Around seven, my shift finally ended.

I walked outside.

And there she was.

Bull.

No phone. No screen. No miles between us.

• • •

Naturally, we tried to kiss.

You'd think two grown women could handle that.

Apparently not.

We were both so nervous that our faces forgot how to cooperate.

Teeth. Noses. A collision of some kind.

Then we laughed.

It wasn't perfect. It was awkward, funny, real. Us.

After work, I parked my car and climbed into Bull's Jeep.

That evening, we went to a Fourth of July celebration. Bull met my sister, my brother, and some of my nieces.

There was no slow introduction into my world.

She drove hundreds of miles, nearly knocked teeth with me during our first kiss, and then got introduced to family.

Welcome to Kentucky, Bull.

• • •

That Fourth of July carried an old memory too. Years earlier, I'd been at a Fourth of July celebration when police told Mom and Dad our Paintsville house was on fire.

One Fourth of July had become connected to losing a home.

This one was quietly beginning a journey toward finding another.

• • •

Eventually, the visit had to end.

Before meeting, saying goodnight meant ending a FaceTime call. After meeting, goodbye meant watching someone physically leave.

When Bull headed back to Georgia, I knew something had changed.

I couldn't put her neatly back inside my phone.

Whatever this was becoming, it wasn't just a friendship happening through FaceTime anymore.

Kentucky was my home. Georgia was Bull's.

If we were going to build something together, eventually those two separate lives would have to become one.

Chapter Eighteen

Where the Road Led Me

Kentucky had always been home.

Short Fork. Falcon Road. Paintsville. Johnson Fork.

Those weren't simply names on a map. They were pieces of me.

Kentucky held almost every version of me.

Then Bull came along.

And suddenly Georgia wasn't just another state.

It was where she was.

• • •

After that first visit, long distance became harder.

Before I'd met Bull in person, FaceTime had felt like enough.
Afterward, I knew exactly what was missing.

So we talked. We planned. We looked forward to seeing each other again.

But underneath all of that was a question neither of us could avoid forever: Where was this going?

Kentucky was my life. Georgia was Bull's.

If we were serious about building something together, at some point those two lives had to meet.

• • •

By this point in my life, I paid attention to different things.

Could we talk when something bothered us? Could we laugh when life wasn't going according to plan? Could we be quiet together? Could I be myself around her?

I wanted peace.

With Bull, I began understanding how different peace felt.

Peace wasn't boring. It was being able to breathe inside your own life.

• • •

Eventually, the distance had to change.

That meant leaving Kentucky.

My roots were there. My parents were there. My childhood was there.
My children had grown up there. My family was there.

But I had learned something about home.

A place can hold your history without holding your future.

Leaving Kentucky didn't mean rejecting where I came from. You don't leave those things at a state line. You carry them.

So I did.

• • •

Georgia became part of my story.

At first, it was Bull's world. I was the one adjusting.

Two grown women come with habits and opinions. Lots of opinions.

Bull and I learned each other in everyday life, not through a screen anymore.

Sometimes love looks like laughing in the kitchen. Sometimes it's sitting outside talking. Sometimes it's getting on each other's nerves and being over it twenty minutes later.

I was learning how happiness could simply feel.

• • •

I hadn't lost Kentucky. It had simply stopped being the only place where my life could happen.

Bull and I began building routines of our own.

One day you realize you're saying we more often than I.

Our lives weren't visiting each other anymore.

They were joining.

I didn't want everything I'd survived to make me afraid of everything I might still have.

• • •

Bull and I talked about marriage.

This time, the idea didn't come from other people telling me what I should do.

I was a grown woman who understood what a wedding could promise and what it couldn't.

Marriage couldn't guarantee that life would always be easy.

But I could choose the person I wanted beside me while we lived it.
I wanted Bull.

• • •

As we began thinking about the wedding, there was someone I wished could be there.

Bull's mother.

I never knew her personally. I knew her through stories and through the woman she helped raise. I'd heard she was a caring woman.

Bull had a pendant that had belonged to her mother.

I would attach it to my bouquet.

Something borrowed.

A small piece of her mother carried with me as I walked toward her daughter.

My parents wouldn't physically be there either.

But absence didn't mean they couldn't be part of the day.

We carry people in different ways.

• • •

August 6, 2026 was getting closer.

Soon I would stand beside Bull.

Soon the woman I'd first known through a phone screen would become my wife.

For once, I wasn't starting over because something had ended.

I was beginning because something beautiful was about to start.

And I was ready.

Chapter Nineteen

The Day I Chose Forever

August 6, 2026.

My wedding day.

There are dates you remember because something was taken from you.

And then there are dates you remember because life gives you something.

This was one of those.

I was marrying Bull.

• • •

That morning, I wasn't the seventeen-year-old girl who once wore a white wedding dress because everyone around her believed marriage was the right thing to do.

I wasn't hiding who I was or asking anyone for permission.

I was forty-eight years old.

I had lived enough life to understand that a wedding isn't magic. It doesn't erase the past or guarantee tomorrow.

It is two people standing in the present and saying: I choose you.

And I chose Bull.

• • •

As I got ready, I thought about the people who weren't there.

Dad. Mom.

There are moments when you miss your parents differently. A wedding is one of them.

I wondered what Dad would have thought if he could see me. I wondered what Mom would say.

Those are the moments death steals too. Not only the person, but the future moments you were supposed to have with them.

But I carried them with me.

• • •

Bull had someone missing too.

Her mother.

I never got the chance to know Bull's mom personally, but I'd heard she was a caring woman.

A pendant that had belonged to her was attached to my bouquet.

That little pendant meant more than jewelry.

When I looked at it, I thought about two mothers who weren't physically there. Mine and Bull's.

Family isn't only the people standing in the room.

Sometimes family is memory, a photograph, a story, a piece of jewelry attached to a bouquet.

• • •

I looked at Bull and thought about the first time I'd seen her in person.

Standing outside my workplace after she'd driven from Georgia to Kentucky.

Then that first attempt at a kiss.

Teeth. Noses.

We'd come a long way from nearly injuring each other with our first kiss.

Now we were standing here, ready to get married.

• • •

There had been so many versions of me before this one.

The little girl on Short Fork. The child in the white house on Falcon Road. The girl fishing for bluegill in Paintsville. The teenager watching Dad die. The seventeen-year-old holding her first baby. The woman who finally chose herself. The woman who stopped apologizing for who she loved.

Every one of them had brought me here.

I wasn't marrying Bull despite my past.

I was marrying her as the woman my entire past had shaped.

• • •

Then it was time.

All the miles between Georgia and Kentucky, all the FaceTime calls, all the laughter, all the ordinary days had brought us here.

I stood beside her and made my promises.

When Bull became my wife, I felt something settle inside me.

Not because marriage completed me. Bull wasn't there to rescue me, and I wasn't there to rescue her.

We were two women with histories of our own choosing to build something together.

• • •

Real life was exactly what waited for us.

There would be ordinary mornings. Bills. Work. Family. Laughter. Good days. Hard days.

I wasn't afraid of that.

Happiness wasn't a life without problems. It was being present enough to recognize the good while you had it.

I looked at my wife.

Bull.

The woman who had once been a name appearing on my phone.

Now she was my wife.

And I smiled.

• • •

August 6, 2026 wasn't the ending of my story.

It was another page. An important one. A beautiful one.

For years, I'd looked backward trying to understand how I'd gotten from one place to another.

But on my wedding day, I didn't want to look backward anymore.

I wanted to stand exactly where I was.

Beside Bull.

My wife.

And let that moment be enough.

Chapter Twenty

I Am Home

For most of my life, I thought home was a place.

Maybe that began on Short Fork.

A little girl doesn't think about what makes somewhere home. She just knows the road, the holler, the people, the sounds, and where she's supposed to lay her head at night.

She doesn't know yet how quickly all of those things can change.

I didn't.

• • •

My childhood taught me early that houses don't last forever.

We moved. We started over. We moved again.

Then came Paintsville. A house. A field. A mountain. A pond. Bluegill that Mom would fry after we brought them home. The sound of race cars from 201 Speedway. Dad trying to teach me how to drive and me nearly putting us into a tree.

For a while, that was home.

Then one Fourth of July, it burned.

Maybe that was the first time I understood that something could disappear even when you weren't ready to lose it.

• • •

We started over again.

Johnson Fork.

The two-story white farmhouse. The barn. Gardens. Animals. Life everywhere.

That place became home too.

Until August 1993.

Dad walked onto the back porch and never walked back inside.

I was fifteen.

There are moments that divide your life into before and after.

That was one of mine.

Same house. Same land. Same family.

Nothing felt the same.

That's when I learned that a house can still be standing and home can still disappear.

• • •

Mom tried to survive losing Dad.

I was young enough to be angry about the ways she changed. I needed my mother. Calvin needed his mother.

But Mom needed something nobody could give her.

She needed Dad back.

Understanding doesn't rewrite what happened. It simply allows you to look backward with older eyes.

Mom wasn't only Mom. She was a woman, a wife, a mother, a person who loved someone and then had to wake up every morning in a world where he wasn't there.

• • •

Then I became a mother.

Seventeen years old, holding a baby girl and wondering how in the world anyone thought I was qualified to take her home.

There are moments in life when you don't become ready. You simply become responsible.

Motherhood was one of them.

My children probably thought I was raising them.

They were raising me right along with them.

• • •

I spent years trying to build the kind of home I thought a family was supposed to have.

A mother. A father. Children. A house. Land. Vehicles. Jobs.

Sometimes we were okay. Sometimes we weren't.

You cannot look at somebody's house and know whether they're happy inside it.

You cannot count someone's possessions and calculate their peace.

Eventually I learned that none of those things were worth more than myself.

• • •

Eventually, I walked away.

For somebody who had lost homes before, you'd think leaving one willingly would have been impossible.

Instead, it taught me the difference between losing something and releasing it.

I chose myself.

And when I settled into my new home, I didn't have nearly as much as I'd had before.

But I had peace.

• • •

I also stopped running from a truth I'd known since I was young.

I loved women.

Eventually I understood that nobody else had to live with the consequences of the choices they wanted me to make.

I did.

So I stopped asking permission.

I lived openly. I loved openly.

I married a woman. That marriage eventually ended.

Some things are private. Some things can simply be acknowledged and left behind.

That relationship mattered. Then it ended.

And my story continued.

• • •

On April 7, 2025, Bull checked on me.

Such a small thing.

A message.

My phone lit up. A woman in Georgia wanted to know if I was okay.

I answered.

Sometimes life changes quietly.

Bull became my friend. Then my best friend. Then the woman who drove from Georgia to Kentucky to meet me.

Somewhere along the way, the woman inside my phone became the woman beside me.

Eventually, I left the state that had held almost my entire story.

I wasn't leaving my history behind.

I brought it with me.

• • •

Then came August 6, 2026.

Bull became my wife.

On my bouquet was a pendant that had belonged to her mother.

My parents weren't there. Bull's mother wasn't there.

But love has a strange way of surviving the people who first gave it to us.

We carry pieces of them forward.

• • •

Now, when I look back over my life, I see something I couldn't see while I was living it.

I spent years believing I was always starting over.

Maybe I wasn't.

Maybe I was continuing.

The little girl from Short Fork didn't disappear when we moved. She came with me.

So did the girl from Paintsville. The teenager from Johnson Fork. The daughter who lost her dad. The seventeen-year-old mother. The woman who stayed. The woman who finally left. The woman who stopped hiding. The woman who loved, lost, and loved again.

They're all still here.

They're all me.

• • •

I used to think strength meant never falling apart.

I don't anymore.

I've fallen apart. I've cried. I've been scared. I've stayed when I should have left. I've made mistakes. I've loved imperfectly. I've survived imperfectly.

But I survived.

Maybe strength is realizing that when everything falls apart, you are still there.

And as long as you're still there, you can build again.

• • •

If I could stand in front of every younger version of me, I wouldn't tell them everything that's coming.

I'd tell them only this:

Keep going.

There are roads ahead you can't see yet. There are people you haven't met. There are versions of yourself you haven't become.

There are endings that will feel like the end of everything.

They aren't.

Keep going.

• • •

I started this story believing home was somewhere behind me.

Maybe Short Fork. Maybe Paintsville. Maybe Johnson Fork. Maybe one of the houses that no longer exists.

For years, I thought if I could get back to the right place, find the right person, build the right house, or create the right family, I would finally feel settled.

But home was never waiting at the end of a road.

It wasn't something another person could hand me.

Home was something I had to find inside myself.

Bull is part of my home. My children are part of my home. Mom and Dad will always be part of it. Kentucky is part of it. Georgia is part of it now too.

But none of those things require me to disappear inside them.

I can love someone deeply without losing myself. I can leave a place without losing where I came from. I can remember people without living only in grief.

And I can belong somewhere without giving up belonging to myself.

• • •

My life isn't perfect. I don't expect it to be.

But I'm not the frightened girl waiting for somebody else to tell her what happens next anymore.

I'm the woman who lived through everything that came before.

I know her now.

I trust her.

After all the houses, all the roads, all the people I've loved, all the things I've lost, all the times I've started again, I don't have to keep searching for

home.

I am home.

A Letter to My Dad

Dear Dad,

There are so many things I wish I could tell you.

I wish I had known, when I was young, how precious ordinary days were. I wish I had asked more questions, listened to more stories, and held on a little tighter to the moments when you were simply there.

I still remember you trying to teach me to drive in that field in Paintsville. I remember the farm, the animals, and the life we had on Johnson Fork. I remember the little things that probably didn't seem important at the time but became important after you were gone.

I remember the day we lost you. Some moments divide a life into before and after, and that day did that to mine.

Billionaires who fall first. Alphas who have to earn her trust.

Search **Lokepub** on Google when you feel like a romance with a little more tension.

I was only fifteen. There was so much life ahead of me that you never got to see.

You didn't get to watch me become the woman I am today. You didn't get to see all of your grandchildren grow. You weren't here for the times I fell apart, the times I started over, or the day I finally learned that I could choose my own life.

Fake dating is fun. Real jealousy is where it gets interesting.

Look up **Lokepub** on Google when you're ready for another romance.

But I have carried you through all of it.

There were times I wished I could sit beside you and ask what you thought I should do. There were times I wanted to hear your voice or see you sitting in your chair again.

Fated mates or a vampire she really should stay away from?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and see which romance catches your eye.

I hope you would be proud of me.

Not because I got everything right. I didn't.

Fated mates or a vampire she really should stay away from?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and see which romance catches your eye.

But because I kept going.

I became a mother. I worked hard. I loved my children with everything I had. I survived things I never imagined I would have to survive. I learned how to start over, and eventually I learned how to be myself.

A vampire who remembers every kiss. A woman determined to forget him.

If forbidden love is your thing, have a browse on [Lokepub](#).

I wish you could have met Bull. I wish you could have seen me on my wedding day and known that after all the roads my life took, I found peace.

No matter how many years pass, I will always be your little girl.

I love you, Dad.

I miss you.

And I carry you with me everywhere I go.

Love always,

Your daughter,

Neva

A Letter to Myself

Dear Neva,

You're going to cry more tears than you can imagine. You're going to lose people you love. You'll spend years trying to become the person everyone else expects you to be.

Don't spend your life carrying guilt that was never yours to carry.

Billionaires who fall first. Alphas who have to earn her trust.

Search **Lokepub** on Google when you feel like a romance with a little more tension.

You're going to become a mother while you're still young. There will be nights when you're exhausted and afraid, but your children will remember that their mother loved them with everything she had.

Fated mates or a vampire she really should stay away from?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and see which romance catches your eye.

There will be relationships that leave scars. Remember: you don't have to lose yourself to love someone else.

Fated mates or a vampire she really should stay away from?

Search **Lokepub** on Google and see which romance catches your eye.

You'll start over more than once. Each time, you'll become a little stronger, a little wiser, and a little more yourself.

He rejected their bond. She chose a life beyond his pack.

Love a werewolf romance where she gets the last word? Take a look at [Lokepub](#).

Keep climbing those Kentucky hills. Hold your daddy a little tighter while you still can. Tell your mama you love her, even on the days you don't understand her. Love your babies with your whole heart.

She signed the divorce papers. Now he wants to talk.

Sometimes the best part is watching him earn a second chance. Find your next read at [Lokepub](#).

Don't spend your life trying to fit into someone else's idea of who you're supposed to be.

I'm proud of you.

With love,

Neva

A Letter to My Mom

Dear Mom,

As a little girl, I didn't understand what grief had done to you. After Dad died, it sometimes felt like I had lost both of my parents.

Now that I've lived more life, I understand so much more.

I remember your banana pudding and the vanilla wafers I stole. I remember you taking coffee to Dad's chair every morning after he died. I remember you driving me to every doctor's appointment when I was pregnant.

Those long trips to Lexington were the months when I found my mother again.

There were times we didn't understand each other, but through it all, you were still my mom.

Thank you for giving me life and for the sacrifices I didn't understand until I became a mother myself.

I love you. I always have, and I always will.

Love,

Your daughter,

Neva

A Letter to My Children

My precious children,

You have always been the greatest blessing of my life.

You saw me struggle, cry, make difficult decisions, and begin again. Sometimes I got things right. Sometimes I didn't. But I never stopped trying to give you a good life.

You gave me purpose when I felt lost and hope when I couldn't see it for myself.

Thank you for loving me through my imperfections and for supporting me when I chose a new path.

Never stay where your spirit is being broken. Never believe you have to become someone else to earn love.

Be kind. Work hard. Forgive often. Laugh as much as you can. Love with your whole heart.

No matter how old you are, you will always be my babies.

Forever and always,

Mom

A Letter to My Wife, Cynthia “Bull” Linley

My Dearest Bull,

One simple message changed my life.

On April 7, 2025, you reached out to check on me. At a time when so many people had formed opinions without knowing my story, you chose kindness.

Before we met face to face, you became my best friend.

I'll never forget walking out of work and seeing you waiting in the parking lot—or our perfectly imperfect first kiss when we bumped noses and teeth and laughed.

You didn't ask me to become anyone else.

Thank you for loving my children, welcoming my family, and showing me what peaceful love looks like.

You didn't rescue me. I had already fought my way through the hardest chapters of my life.

But you walked beside me as I began a new one.

Every mile eventually led me to you.

You are my best friend, my greatest blessing, and my home.

Forever yours,

Your Wife,

Neva

Acknowledgments

No one walks through life alone.

First, I want to thank my children. You have been my greatest joy, my greatest teachers, and the reason I found strength through every season.

To my parents, Roy Calvin Gipson and Goldie Gipson, thank you for giving me life and teaching me lessons about love, work, perseverance, and family.

To my siblings, nieces, nephews, and extended family, thank you for being part of my story.

To Richard and Daniel, thank you for the roles you played in my journey and for the children and lessons that became part of my life.

To my wife, Cynthia “Bull” Linley, thank you for loving me exactly as I am and for the friendship, laughter, and peace we share.

To every friend who encouraged me, prayed for me, or simply listened when I needed someone, thank you.

Finally, thank you to the reader.

If my story reminds even one person that healing is possible and that new beginnings are worth believing in, every page has been worth writing.

About the Author

Neva Gibson was born on December 19, 1977, in Prestonsburg, Kentucky, and was raised in the mountains of eastern Kentucky, where family, hard work, and resilience shaped the foundation of her life.

For many years, Neva devoted her career to caring for others as a Certified Nursing Assistant.

As a mother, grandmother, wife, and survivor, Neva has experienced life's highest joys and deepest heartbreaks. She has endured loss, raised a family, rebuilt her life more than once, and discovered that even difficult roads can lead to unexpected blessings.

Today, Neva lives in Georgia with her wife, Cynthia “Bull” Linley. Together, they enjoy a peaceful life centered on family, love, laughter, and gratitude.

The Road That Found Me is Neva's first book. It is a gift to her children, grandchildren, and future generations—a record of where they

came from and a reminder that it is always possible to begin again.

To the Reader

If you've made it to this final page, thank you.

Thank you for walking beside me through the mountains of eastern Kentucky, through heartbreak, loss, motherhood, laughter, healing, and hope.

If there is one thing I hope you take with you after closing this book, it is this:

Never let your past convince you that your future has already been written.

You are stronger than your hardest days.

You are more than your mistakes.

And no matter where life has taken you, there is always another road ahead.

Thank you for walking mine.

With love and gratitude,

Neva Gibson
